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AUTHOR Hagan, Margaret Stanley; Deal, James E.
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ABSTRACT

One goal of a longitudinal study of stepfamilies, divorced maternal custody families, and nondivorced families was to assess similarities and differences between family members' interactions at the dyadic and triadic levels across time. Observers' ratings of videotaped spouse-to-spouse, parent-to-child, and child-to-parent behaviors during both dyadic and triadic problem-solving settings were obtained at three waves of data collection. The results revealed that, compared to mothers in nondivorced families, remarried mothers were significantly less positive, more negative, and less controlling in dyadic mother-child interactions even after 26 months of remarriage. In contrast, children of remarried mothers closely resembled children in nondivorced families in their behaviors toward their mothers. Data on the stepfather-stepchild relationship showed little evidence that the stepfather adopted a more active and positive parental role over time. The positive and negative behaviors of stepfathers and stepchildren paralleled each other at all three waves of data collection. The hypothesis that interactions between nondivorced family members would be moe consistent than would interactions between remarried family members was partially supported. Children in newly forming stepfamilies experienced greater inconsistencies than did children in nondivorced families. Inconsistencies observed may be an index of continued role ambiguity even 2.5 years after remarriage. (NB)

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Levels of Analyses: Changes in Patterns of Family Interactions From Dyadic to Triadic Level

Margaret Stanley Hagan and James E. Deal

Most people modify their behavior in response to the situations in which they find themselves. A parent may be more restrained in disciplining his or her child in the sight of dozens of disapproving eyes in the supermarket than in the confines of the home. Similarly, a child may show more tolerance for the cunning antics of a younger sibling in the presence of parents than when the two children are playing alone. Some alteration of behavior in response to situational demands is adaptive. However, too many shifts in family members' behaviors across interpersonal situations in the home may cause the family to be seen as an unstable, unpredictable, even threatening environment.

Assessing similarities and differences between nondivorced and remarried family members' interactions at the dyadic and triadic levels across time provides us with one picture of how consistent the family environment is for the child. There is ample evidence in the literature that consistency in parental behavior provides children with a secure base and eases adjustment to stressors. In this study consistency in observed behavior can be conceptualized in three ways: consistency between interactions in dyadic and triadic settings, consistency over time, and consistency between family members' behaviors. It was thought that a consistent environment would assist the child as he or she makes the transition from life in a single-parent household to life in a stepfamily. It was expected, however, that children in newly remarried families would

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experience more inconsistency than those in nondivorced families. This inconsistency could be attributed to the role ambiguity found in newly forming stepfamilies and thus be a symptom of the disequilibrium characteristic of families in transition. Mothers and children in stepfather families have a history of roles developed during their shared life together, most recently in their shared experiences in a single-mother household. The stepfather is intruding on this preexisting system. As stepfamily members adjust over time, one would expect the new families to achieve a new equilibrium. Unfortunately, as we will see here, the equilibrium achieved may be more negative than positive.

Observers' ratings of video-taped spouse to spouse, parent to child, and child to parent behaviors during both dyadic and triadic problem-solving settings were obtained at each wave of data collection. The observational code used is a system of five-point scales designed to tap a broad range of family process variables. These variables are not frequency ratings but assess the qualitative aspects of family members' behaviors towards each other. Through data reduction we were able to arrive at four dimensions: Positivity and Negativity for both parents and children; Parental Control; and Children's Extroversion/Introversion.

Insert Table 1 about here.

This paper addressed three hypotheses. First, it was expected that observed family interactions in stepfamilies would be more negative than those in nondivorced families at Wave 1 but that remarried family interactions would improve over time and by two and one half years later resemble those seen in nondivorced families. Second, it was expected that over time, stepfathers would begin to adopt both a more active parenting

role and an increased supportive role with respect to their wives' parenting. Third, it was expected that dyadic interactions between nondivorced family members would be more consistent both across time and across settings, that is across settings in which only two family members are present to settings in which three family members are present, than would interactions among remarried family members.

To address these hypotheses, we will describe the interactions within parent-parent, mother-child, and father-child dyads in turn, examining the characteristics of each interaction in the dyadic setting followed by a discussion of how the presence of the third family member impacts on the dyad in question. At all times our primary focus will be on describing consistencies and inconsistencies in observed behaviors.

Husband-Wife Interactions

We look first at the marital dyad. While nondivorced and remarried wives are equally supportive, assertive, and self-disclosing in dyadic interactions with their husbands, remarried wives are more negative. Remarried wives, especially wives in stepfamilies with sons, are more hostile and coercive. While, this pattern of similar positivity but greater negativity on the part of remarried wives in the dyad diminishes somewhat at Wave 2, it does reemerge just as strong at Wave 3, two and one-half years after remarriage.

Insert Graph 1 about here.

Furstenberg has talked of the greater openness of communication in remarriages and it might be thought that this expression of negativity is part of this new frankness. However, when we look at husbands' behaviors in the marital dyad, the new husbands are no more negative in their dyadic

interactions with wives than are nondivorced husbands, at least initially. In fact, unlike their wives, the remarried husbands are warmer and more self-disclosing. They are beginning to talk to their wives about their feelings in the new family situation. At both Waves 2 and 3, remarried husbands remain more self-disclosing but differ from nondivorced husbands on no other dimension.

Insert Graph 2 about here.

In sum, dyadic marital interactions in nondivorced families are characterized by high positivity relative to negativity. Dyadic marital interactions in remarried families are characterized by greater negativity on the part of wives and by greater initial warmth on the part of husbands. Moreover, remarried husbands continue to self-disclose significantly more than do nondivorced husbands at all three time points.

When the child is present, not surprisingly, in both nondivorced and remarried families, husbands and wives become less positive and less negative towards each other as demonsrated in this graph were we see the drop in spouses' negativity. On this graph, the squares indicate behaviors in the marital dyad while the circles indicate behaviors in the triad. It is evident that in triadic interactions spouses are less involved with each other and more focused on the problems of the child. Despite this overall drop, interesting family differences emerge in the ways spouses interact with each other in front of their children. In triadic interactions, remarried wives are more negative toward their husbands at Wave 1 in the initial stage of the remarriage, than are nondivorced wives. Again, this is especially true in stepfamilies with sons. By Wave 2, however, the interactions between remarried spouses in the triad are less negative than

at Wave 1 and with respect to both positive and negative dimensions, resemble the interactions found between nondivorced spouses. At Wave 3, remarried husbands and wives remain similar to nondivorced spouses in their expression of negative behaviors but are significantly less positive in their interactions with each other. It appears that in the early months of remarriage, remarried wives do not adjust their negative behaviors to accommodate to the presence of the child but that by one year after remarriage, they have begun to do so.

Insert Graph 3 about here.

We may conclude that, other than to change their focus from each other to the child, spousal interactions in nondivorced families are consistent within dyadic and triadic interactions across time. Spousal interactions in stepfamilies are less consistent across settings and over time. Children in stepfamilies, especially sons, are exposed to more marital conflict early in the remarriage. As time passes, these young adolescents are exposed to less open conflict but also to parents who are less supportive of each other.

Parent-Child Interactions

In the next section we will first describe mother-child and father-child or stepfather-stepchild dyadic interactions. We will then describe family members' behaviors in triadic interactions focusing on how the presence of the mother impacts on the father-child or stepfather-stepchild dyad and how the presence of the father or stepfather impacts on the mother-child dyad. By comparing the parenting behaviors of mothers, fathers, and stepfathers in dyadic parent-child interactions to parenting behaviors observed in triadic interactions we are able to assess the degree to which children in nondivorced and remarried families

experience a consistent parental environment.

Mother-Child Dyadic Interactions. When we examine the mother-child dyadic interactions we find that across time and in both nondivorced and remarried families, mothers are more positive and less negative in interactions with daughters than with sons. Superimposed over these sex of child differences we find that, as predicted, mother-child dyadic interactions are more conflictual at Wave 1 in stepfamilies than in nondivorced families. Remarried mothers are more hostile and coercive and less supportive and assertive in their dyadic interactions with their children at Wave 1 and at Wave 3. However, there is an interesting similarity between nondivorced and remarried mothers' behaviors at Wave 2. If one were to observe mothers' behaviors only at Waves 1 and 2, it would appear that the remarried mothers were adjusting. Observations at Wave 3 demonstrate, however, that as their children move further into adolescence there is a reemergence of negativity. In addition, as was found in the interviews, remarried mothers do not monitor or control their children's behaviors to the extent that nondivorced mothers do. Again, there is an interesting difference over time with all mothers decreasing their control at Wave 2 but reasserting control at Wave 3 as the children advance into adolescence.

Insert Graph 4 about here.

Over time the behaviors demonstrated by the children in stepfamilies also change. They become more positive and less negative and surprisingly, by two and a half years after their mothers' remarriages, they resemble children in nondivorced families. Mothers in stepfamilies also demonstrate an increase in positivity. However, as shown in the previous graph, unlike

their children, they do not demonstrate a corresponding decrease in negativity and their Wave 3 observed negativity remains higher than that expressed by nondivorced mothers.

Insert Graph 5 about here.

In sum, observed dyadic mother-child interactions in nondivorced families are characterized across time as more positive than negative. These mothers are relatively more supportive, higher monitoring, and more controlling. Their children are more prosocial and less hostile and coercive than are children in stepfamilies. In the early months of remarriage, the dyadic mother-child interactions in stepfamilies are characterized by reciprocated negativity. Furthermore, remarried mothers exert less control than do nondivorced mothers. Over time these observed mother-child dyadic relationships improve but contrary to the recovery reported by the mothers themselves, remain more problematic than those seen in intact families

<u>(Step)Father-(Step)Child Dyadic Interactions</u>. The greatest differences in family interactions might have been expected in the stepfather-stepchild interactions since the stepfather is the outsider trying to gain acceptance and establish a new role in the family. Contrary to the self-report data presented in the previous paper, we find that at Wave 1 there are few differences between the observed positive and negative behaviors exhibited in the stepfather-stepchild dyad and those observed in the biological father-child dyad. Family type differences are found only at the scale level in children's antisocial behavior and in fathers' self-disclosure, monitoring, and control. As in Wave 1 dyadic interactions with their mothers, stepchildren are more antisocial toward their stepfathers than are

children in nondivorced families. Their stepfathers are more self-disclosing but make fewer attempts to monitor or control their stepchildren's behaviors. It may appear that in the early months of remarriage, stepfathers are trying to establish a positive relationship with their new wives' children. However, coders have equated the dyadic behaviors observed between new stepfathers and stepchildren to those one would expect to find between polite strangers.

Insert Graph 6 about here.

The polite stranger relationship does not last. As noted earlier, it was predicted that over time, stepfathers would establish a warm, influential parental relationship with their stepchildren. As was also reflected in the interview measures presented in the previous paper, this did not prove to be the case. Instead, stepfathers decrease their level of observed positivity toward the child at Wave 2 and, although there is a slight increase in positivity at Wave 3, they are still less positive than they were at Wave 1. Moreover, stepfathers are less positive than biological fathers at both Wave 2 and Wave 3. While stepfathers observed negativity remains fairly stable between Waves 1 and 2, there is a dramatic increase in their negativity between Waves 2 and 3. By two and one half years after the remarriage, stepfathers are significantly more negative in their dyadic interactions with their stepchildren than biological fathers are with their children.

Stepchildren demonstrate a similar decrease in observed positivity at Wave 2 but this is surprisingly followed by an increase in positivity at Wave 3. This increase is matched by the children in nondivorced homes. However, at both Waves 2 and 3 children in nondivorced families are more

positive towards their fathers than stepchildren are to stepfathers. Finally, while children in nondivorced families show a slight decrease in their negativity toward their fathers over time, the stepchildren show a slight increase during the first year in a stepfamily followed by a larger increase observed at Wave 3. Again, the differences between the observed biological father-child relationship and the stepfather-stepchild relationship begin to emerge at Wave 2.

Insert Graph 7 about here.

Overall, the stepfather-stepchild relationship is observed to be less positive and more negative than the biological father-child relationship and, with one exception, tend to become less positive and more negative over time. The one exception to this trend is the increase in stepchild to stepfather positivity observed at Wave 3.

Triadic Parent-Child Interactions. When we look at the triadic interactions and the impact fathers or stepfathers have on the mother-child dyad we find that nondivorced mothers have greater influence over children's behaviors at Wave 1 when the fathers are present. However, no significant shifts in nondivorced mothers' positivity and negativity are observed from dyad to triad or across time. On the other hand, remarried mothers remain equally positive but are less negative and have less influence when stepfathers are present. Recall that remarried mothers are significantly less positive than nondivorced mothers in dyadic interactions. Nondivorced mothers are more consistent across settings and over time. Moreover, the father's presence supports the nondivorced mother's attempts to influence the younger child's behavior. The presence of the stepfather results only in a moderation of the remarried mothers' hostile and coercive behaviors.

When we examine shifts between children's dyadic behaviors and their triadic behaviors toward their mothers and as demonstrated in this graph, we find that at Waves 1 and 2 and in both nondivorced and remarried families, children are just as positive to their mothers but are less negative when the father or stepfather is present. At Wave 3, however, the presence of the father or stepfather does not moderate the child's negativity towards the mother. Fathers and stepfathers appear to have less influence over children's negativity towards their mothers as the children advance into adolescence.

Insert Graph 8 about here

When we shift our focus to the mother's impact on the father-child or stepfather-stepchild dyad, we note first that there are no significant differences between nondivorced fathers' dyadic and triadic behaviors. We also find no differences between the negativity expressed by stepfathers across dyadic and triadic interactions with their stepchildren. However, when interacting with their stepchildren in the presence of their wives stepfathers are less self-disclosing and less controlling. It appears that when the remarried mothers are present, stepfathers abdicate control and remain involved with their stepchildren only to the extent that they reciprocate the children's negative behaviors. This is not to say that stepchildren are becoming more negative in the triad but that the stepfathers and stepchildren continue to demonstrate the negative cycle seen in their dyadic interactions. Overall, children in both nondivorced and remarried families are just as hostile and coercive towards fathers and stepfathers in the triad as they are in the dyad. However, in both settings stepchildren exhibit higher negativity towards their stepfathers than

biological children do to their fathers. Children in both nondivorced and remarried families are also less positive towards their fathers and stepfathers when the mothers are present but the decline in positivity is far greater for stepchildren.

Insert Graph 9 about here.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we expected to find that family interactions in stepfamilies would be more negative than those in nondivorced families at Wave 1 but that remarried family interactions would improve over time and come to resemble those observed in nondivorced families by Wave 3. We did find that mother-child interactions in stepfamilies are less positive and more negative in the early months of remarriage. However, when we see this mother-child dyad at Wave 3, remarried mothers are significantly less positive, more negative, and less controlling than are nondivorced mothers. Interestingly, at Wave 3 the children of remarried mothers do not appear to be reciprocating their mothers' negative behaviors. These children are warmer and slightly less negative than they were at Wave 1 and closely resemble children in nondivorced families in their behaviors toward their mothers.

Turning to the stepfather-stepchild relationship, we find that contrary to what was expected, this relationship looks best at Wave 1. Over time, we see little evidence of the stepfather adopting a more active and positive parental role. Despite the fact that we see greater evidence of problems in the stepfather-stepchild relationship over time, there appears to be greater reciprocity in this relationship than in the relationships between remarried mothers and their children. In the remarried mother-child relationships at

Wave 3, the child appears to be reciprocating the mother's positive behaviors but shows a decrease in negative behaviors even though the mother is increasing her own negativity. In contrast, the positive and negative behaviors of stepfathers and stepchildren parallel each other at all three time points.

Finally, we expected that interactions between nondivorced family members would be more consistent both across dyadic and triadic settings and across time than would interactions between remarried family members. This was partially supported by our observations. Within waves, nondivorced parents are more consistent in their behaviors across the dyadic and triadic settings than are remarried parents. We do see variations across time, however, in both nondivorced and remarried families. Parents may be targeting their behaviors to the developmental stage of the child. For example, despite the fact that remarried mothers and stepfathers are less controlling at all three time points than are nondivorced parents, both nondivorced and remarried parents are less controlling of the older child at Wave 2 but increase their control as the child moves further into adolescence at Wave 3.

As expected, children in newly forming stepfamilies experience greater inconsistencies than do children in nondivorced families. The inconsistencies observed here may be an index of continued role ambiguity even 2 1/2 years after remarriage. These stepfamilies have yet to achieve the equilibrium observed in nondivorced families.

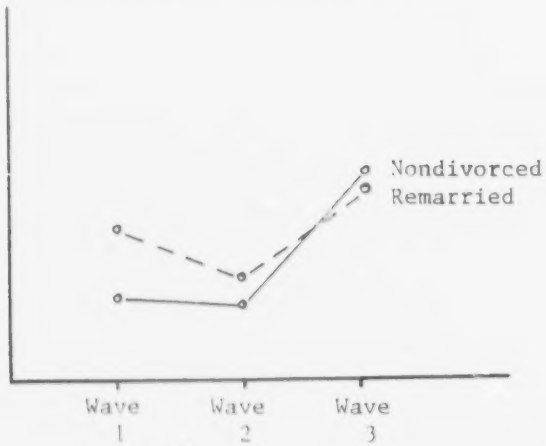
Table 1: Observational Coding System

Factors	Scales
POSITIVITY	Warmth/Involvement Assertiveness Communication Self-Disclosure Mood *
NEGATIVITY	Hostility Coercion Transactional Conflict
PARENTAL POWER	Dominance/Power Parental Influence Monitoring
CHILD'S INTROVERSION/ EXTROVERSION	Mood Shy/Withdrawn

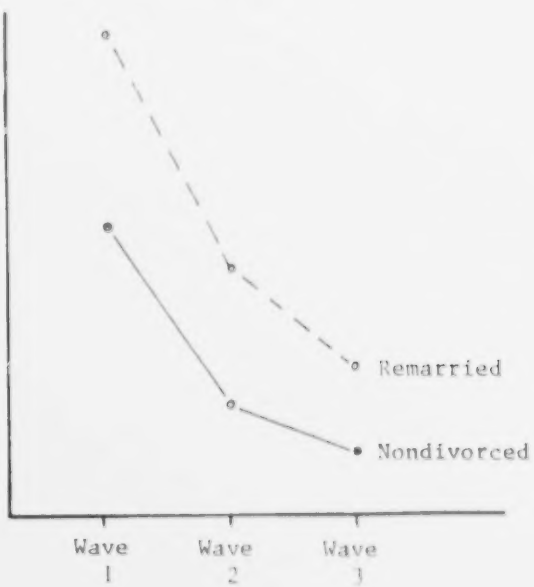
* Mood loads on the Positivity Factor only for parents. Mood loads on the Introversion/ Extroversion Factor for children.

Graph 2: Husbands' Warmth and Self-Disclosure

Husbands' Warmth/Involvement: Marital Dyad



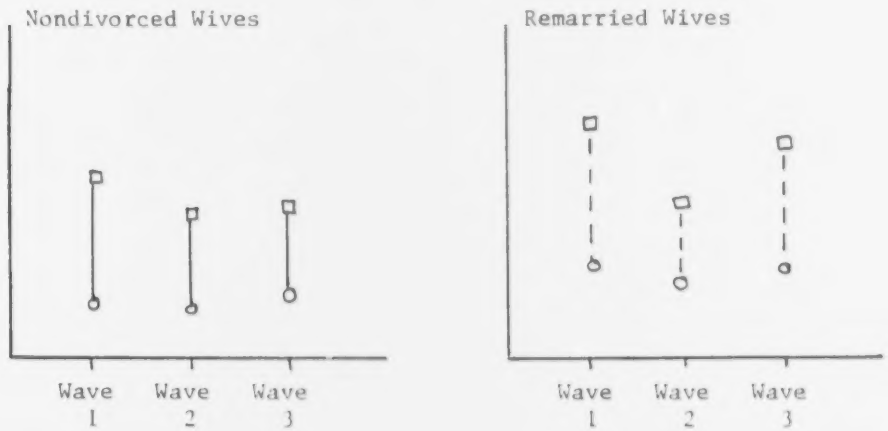
Husbands' Self-Disclosure: Marital Dyad



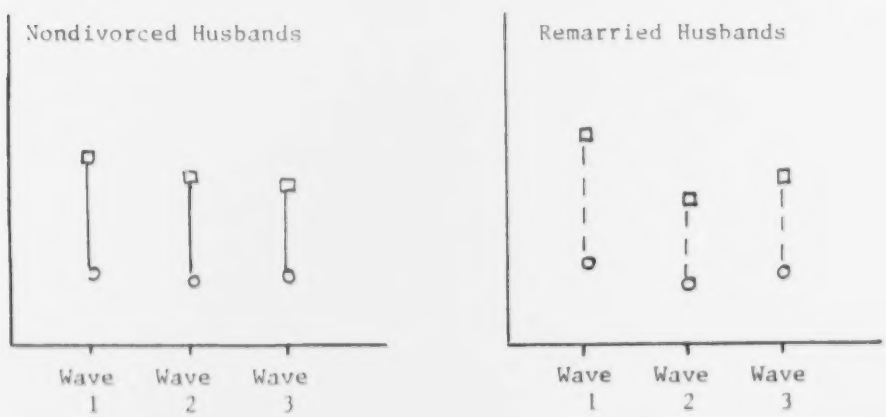
Graph 3: Shifts in Spousal Negativity from the Dyad to Triad

Key: □ = Negativity in the Dyad
○ = Negativity in the Triad

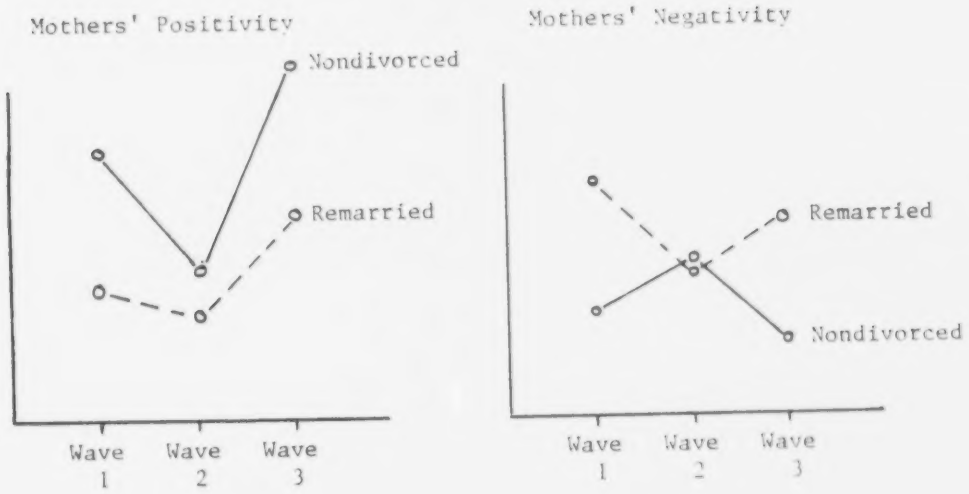
Wives' Negativity toward Husbands in Presence of Child

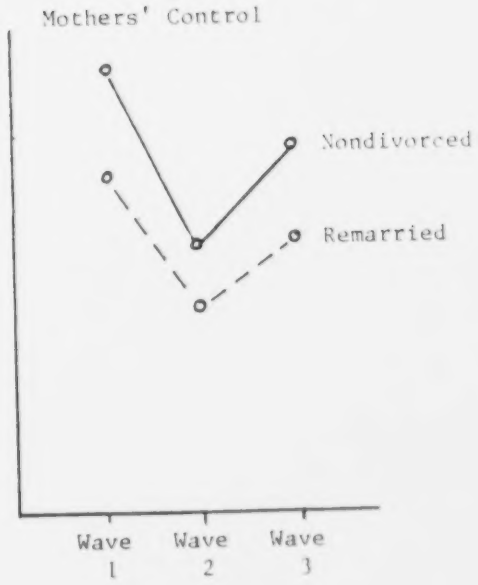


Husbands' Negativity toward Wives in Presence of Child

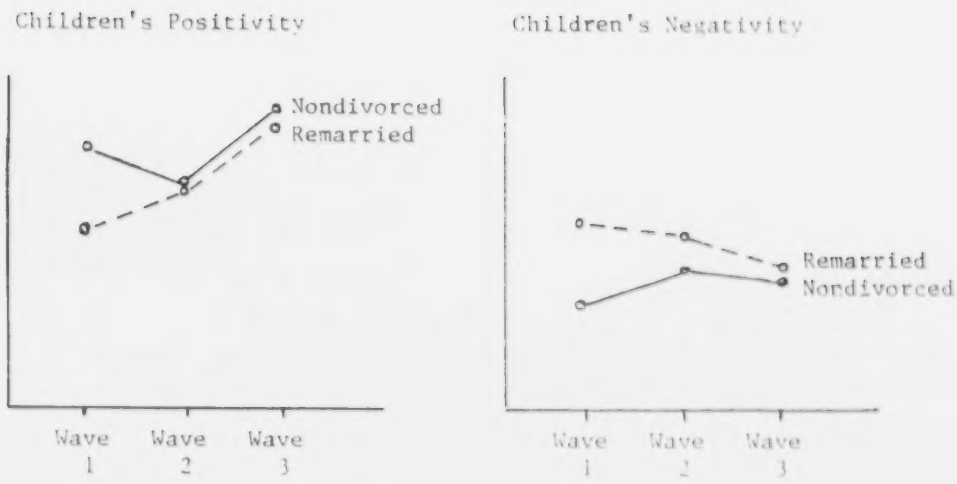


Graph 4: Mothers' Behaviors toward Children: Mother-Child Dyad

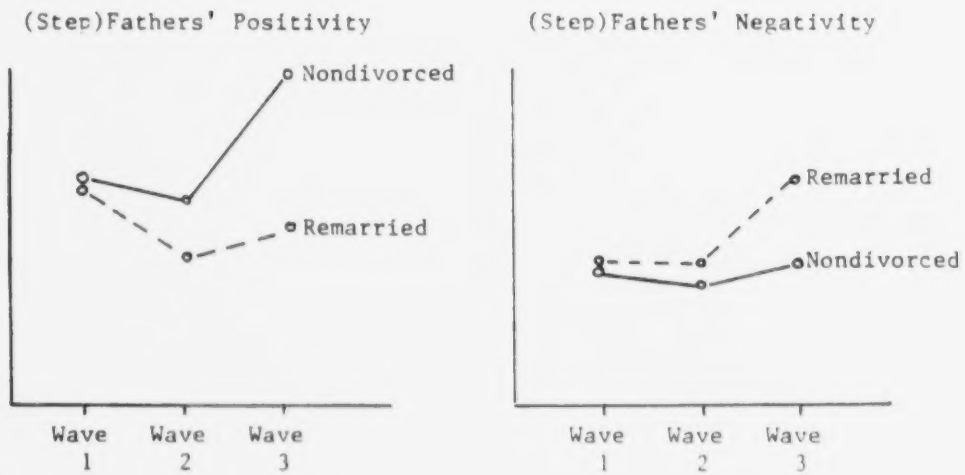




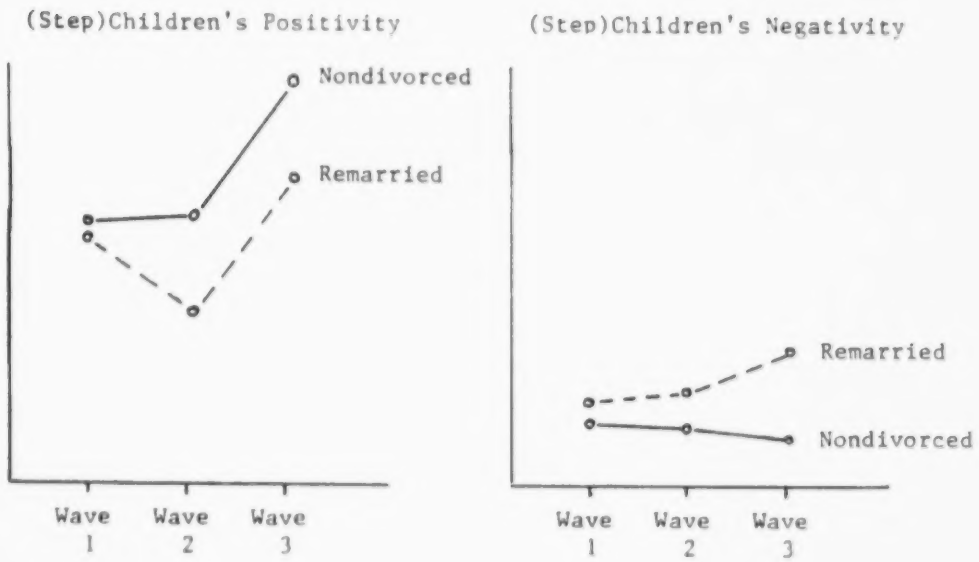
Graph 5: Children's Behaviors toward Mothers: Mother-Child Dyad



Graph 6: (Step)Fathers' Behaviors toward Children: Dyad



Graph : Children's Behaviors toward

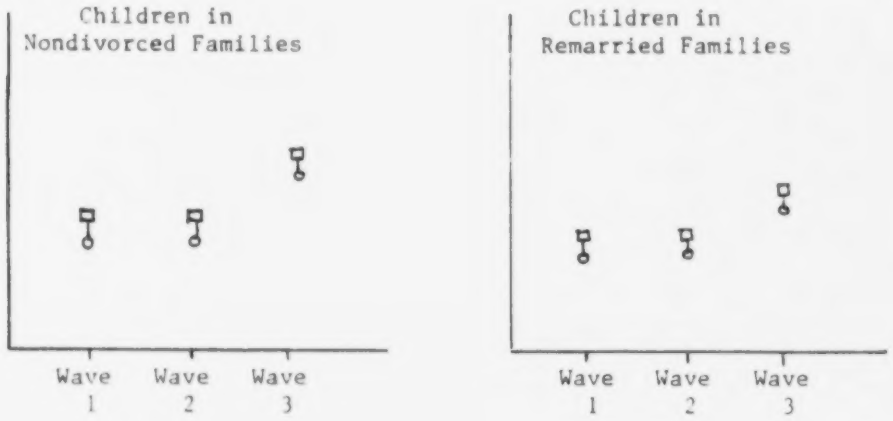


Graph : Shifts in Children's Behaviors toward Mothers When (Step)Fathers Are Present: Dyad to Triad

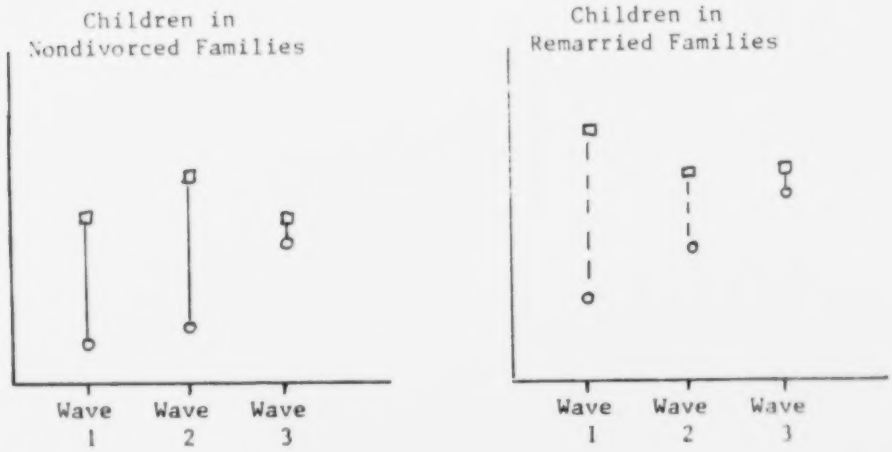
Key: □ = Children's Behavior in Mother-Child Dyad

○ = Children's Behavior toward Mother in the Triad

Children's Positivity toward Mothers in Presence of (Step)Fathers



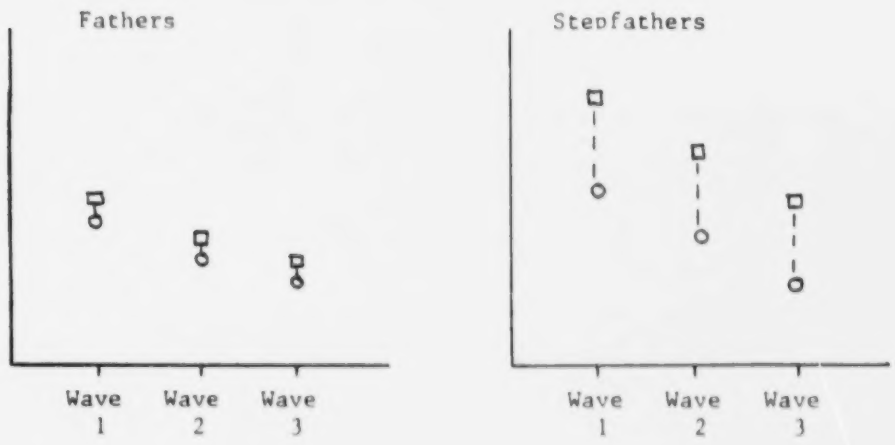
Children's Negativity toward Mothers' in Presence of (Step)Fathers



Graph : Shifts in Fathers and Stepfathers' Behaviors toward Children in Presence of Mothers

Key: □ = Behaviors in Dyad
○ = Behaviors in Triad

(Step)Fathers' Self-Disclosure to Children in Presence of Mother



(Step)Fathers' Control over Children's Behavior in Presence of Mothers